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ABSTRACT

The importance of learner support has been emphasized over and over in the distance education literature but there is a lack of comprehensive analysis of this issue. Besides that, most of existing studies on learner support are based on large-scale correspondence program and few of them provide guidelines for planning and implementing support services in Web-based environments for dual-mode institutions, which is the majority of distance education program providers in nowadays. In this paper, a body of literature on learner support, including various journal articles and technical reports, was examined, and three issues emerged from the review: (1) the lack of research on cost-effectiveness of learner support; (2) the lack of empirical research; and (3) the need for learner-centered approach in designing and implementing learner support. These issues are discussed in detail to enhance understanding of learner support in post-secondary level distance education program, and it is further argued that future research should focus more on developing and refining methods for cost-benefit analysis of learner support, developing a general framework of learner support model in dual-mode institutions, and developing systematic methods to identify, analyze, synthesize, and assess the needs of distance learners. (Contains 63 references.) (Author/AEF)

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CURRENT STATUS OF LEARNER SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: EMERGING ISSUES AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

The importance of learner support has been emphasized over and over in the distance education literature but there is a lack of comprehensive analysis of this issue. Besides that, most of existing studies on learner support are based on large-scale correspondence program and few of them provide guidelines for planning and implementing support services in web-based environments for dual-mode institutions, which is the majority of distance education program providers in nowadays. In this paper, a body of literature on learner support, including various journal articles and technical reports, was examined, and three issues emerged from the review: (1) the lack of research on cost-effectiveness of learner support, (2) the lack of empirical research, and (3) the need for learner-centered approach in designing and implementing learner support. These issues are discussed in detail to enhance our understanding of learner support in post-secondary level distance education program, and it is further argued that future research should focus more on developing and refining methods for cost-benefit analysis of learner support, developing a general framework of learner support model in dual-mode institutions, and developing systematic methods to identify, analyze, synthesize, and assess the needs of distance learners.

Introduction

The needs for learner support in distance education comes from the recognition that learning in distance is often mediated by networked computers with individualistic interfaces that require learners to work alone for the majority of learning process. Since neither the instructor nor their peers are physically present to help and direct access to learning resources and facilities are somewhat limited, distance learners have unique needs, and many researchers and practitioners believe that providing distance learners appropriate support services would increase the quality of learning (Feasley, 1983; Gunawardena, 1988; Sahoo, 1993; Watkins & Wright, 1991). It is not surprising that learner support is used as an important accrediting criterion used by most accrediting agencies (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000; Broad, 1999; Mantyla & Givіden, 2000).

As more and more post-secondary institutions are offering distance education programs or planning to do so in the near future[8], there is a great need for research on designing and implementing learner support services. However, the majority of existing studies on learner support are based on large-scale correspondence programs (i.e. Open University in U.K.), and few of them provide a comprehensive analysis of support services in web-based environments or guidelines for establishing and managing learner support systems in dual-mode institutions (Koble & Bunker, 1997; Simonson, Schlosser, & Hanson, 1999).

There can be several forces underlying the gap between research and practice of learner support, but Robinson (1995) attribute the following two reasons to explain the situation: (1) learner support has been perceived as peripheral to the 'real business' of distance education which is developing course materials, and (2) many researchers tend not to consider learner support as a suitable topic for research since it is contingent on local circumstances and thus not easy to generalize the findings.

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[8] According to a 1999 survey by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), nearly 1/3 of all 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions offered distance courses in 1997-98, and additional twenty percent of them were planning to offer distance courses within three years.

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His points may have been relevant in the past when distance education was viewed as inferior alternative to traditional face-to-face education and the emphasis was on the product, rather than the process. But things are changing, if not already changed, and distance education is considered as a major phenomenon in higher education these days. Distance learners are much more sophisticated, diversified, and demanding than ever, and they expect a lot more than well-designed learning material. Besides that, the competition among distance education providers is such that if an institution fails to satisfy the students, it will loose them to one of its competitors. Thus many institutions offering distance education programs are struggling to better meet the needs of their students. Unfortunately, research on learner support at this point is not able to provide much guidance for the institutions to cope with these problems, and practitioners are learning the lessons in a hard way – by trials and errors.

After reviewing the literature, three issues emerged as most problematic areas in research on learner support: (1) the cost-effectiveness of learner support, (2) the lack of empirical research and the difficulties in generalizing research findings as a result, and (3) the need for learner-centered approach. I believe tackling these issues with greater depth will help enhancing our understanding of learner support in distance education and also help advancing research in this area. Thus the purpose of this paper is to review current status of research on these three issues and suggest recommendations for future research on learner support in distance education.

Definition of Learner Support

Defining the key elements and boundaries of learner support is important in research since it provides a criterion in determining the standard or quality of learner support. However, learner support is rather a broad concept and its definition varies(Robinson, 1995; Sewart, 1993). Some researchers consider resources and interactivity as critical in defining learner support (Garrison, 1987) while others put more emphasis on individualization or customization of services (Thorpe, 1988; Tait, 1995).

There are two distinctive views to approach learner support – supplementary and complementary/holistic (Robinson, 1995; Tait, 1995; Rowntree, 1992; Nunan, 1993). The former is more limited in that learner support is confined as an add-on to course materials or other learning experiences while the latter view it as a crucial factor which pervades the entire education program and something without which distance students' learning experience cannot be complete.

It seems that more and more researchers are taking a holistic approach considering learner support as an integrated part of course and the entire learning process(Sache & Mark, 2000; Scalzo, Matela-Rodier, & Ferrauilo, 2000). From complementary perspective, learner support is all about providing access to both resources and opportunities that leads to lifelong learning (Reid, 1995; Smith, 2000). It extends the range and duration of services and emphasizes the importance of providing quality information, advice and guidance at pre-enrollment and early post-enrollment stages. Hardy & Boaz (1997) even extend the concept of learner support into the next level – "learner development" meaning preparation of the learners for a distance learning experience beyond the technical assistance.

What are the Elements of Learner Support?

There is an almost infinite variation in learner support systems in distance education, and as Sewart (1993) commented, each system is unique in a sense that it is dealing with a different student population in a different context. Thus developing a general yet representative framework of learner support has been a challenging task for researchers in this area.

One of the most comprehensive lists of elements of such a system was developed by Keast(Keast, 1997). He identified four distinctive types of support for distance learners - administrative support, instructional support, technical support, and counseling/tutorial support. This list is by no means exhaustive and misses library support, a very important category that is gaining growing attentions these days. However, it still captures key functions of learner support and most support services suggested by other researchers or practitioners fall under Keast's categories(Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998; Frieden, 1999; Reid, 1995; Sache & Mark, 2000; Tait, 1995).

Each category will be further elaborated in the following section, and considering the special relevance to current emphasis on informational technology in distance education, library support will be added to Keast's four elements of learner support system.

Academic/Tutorial Support

Academic/tutorial support is largely based on Open University model in U.K. where students have access to local study centers and tutors who supervise their academic progress and help with problems (Watkins & Wright, 1991; Sahoo, 1993; Rae, 1989). In more recent web-based distance education programs, the focus of academic support gears toward facilitating collaborative learning and increasing interactivity between distance students and instructor or among distance students (Aoki et al., 1998). Some of the examples of such services include syndicate or learning groups, support by instructor on request, workshops to assist students to develop specific skills or bridge skill gaps, supervision support on research project, and "learning contract" and scheduling (SAIDE, 1998).

Administrative Support

Administrative support services involve maintaining basic program functions such as admissions, registration, course scheduling, student records, and financial transactions (Frieden, 1999). These services are often taken granted but when not planned carefully, they cause greatest frustration from distance students.

Technical Support

Technical support refers to monitoring efficient operation of delivery mediums and offering technical assistance. While much research has been conducted on the use of new technologies in designing and developing distance courses, less effort has been directed toward the use of new technologies to provide support services for such courses (Abate, 1999). Providing an 800 telephone number for students to contact the faculty and staff, requiring that all students have access to email and know how to use it, requiring faculty to schedule office hours particularly for distance students at times that would be convenient to the students (Reinert & Fryback, 1997), and it may be necessary to devote additional on-campus facilities to support the off-campus population.

Counseling Support

Counseling support includes various aspects of guidance and advising. In correspondence studies or other delivery medium with more individualistic interface, the focus of such services tends to be focused on how to deal with academic concerns and/or career advising. In many web-based distance education programs, counseling support also deals with ways to improve communication skills and increase interactivity, and even network with alumni and community building (Aoki et al., 1998).

Many institutions are also requiring orientation sessions that bring the students on campus in order to familiarize them with the services that are available. Such sessions would provide an opportunity to learn the interfaces used to access the services as well as a chance to interact with the support personnel on-campus (Thompson, Winterfield, & Flanders, 1998).

Library Support

Access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post-secondary education and distance learners are entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided for students in traditional campus settings. However, traditional on-campus library services often fail to stretch themselves to meet the library needs of distance students.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (Libraries, 1998) provides a guideline for distance education programs to ensure that library support meet the students' needs in fulfilling course assignments (e.g. required and supplemental readings) and accommodate other information needs as appropriate. Some of the specific examples of library services to meet those needs include region-wide

borrowers cards, consortia membership between academic libraries, and fax and online capabilities for the timely document delivery (Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998).

In a review of the literature on distance learning library support, Stephens (Stephens, 1996) stressed that what was lacking was not only books and journals per se, but instruction and the opportunity to do independent library research. To be able to fill this gap, distance library services need to be more customized and empowering distance learners, such as providing toll-free telephone numbers for library help desk and capabilities to use multiple databases and online public access catalog (Aoki & Pogroszewski, 1998). The combination of special funding arrangements, proactive planning, and promotion is necessary to provide such services (Smith, 2000).

Emerging Issues in Learner Support

Many researchers expected that advances in technology would make it easier to provide quality support services with increased interactivity and automatization (Bates, 1994). However, for all those dramatic changes in terms of delivery medium, from correspondence to audio and video conferencing systems, then to the Internet in nowadays, many issues are remained as same, if not technology adds another level of complexity. Some of them are more critical and have greater implications for future research than others, and thus they will be discussed in more detail in the rest of this paper. Those issues are: (1) the cost-effectiveness of learner support services, (2) the lack of empirical research and difficulties in generalizing the research findings as a result, and (3) the importance of learner-centered approach in learner support.

Cost-Effectiveness of Learner Support

The first issue is related to how to scale customized support services in a cost-effective way. In order to better meet the diverse needs of distance students, support services needs to be more individualized (Brent, 1995; Sahoo, 1993). Providing such services is not an inexpensive proposition, however, and the underlying assumption is that the greater the input to the provision of learner support services, the greater the completion rate and/or learning outcomes (European Commission, 1996).

At this point, there are few studies that offer guidelines on this area, and most of them are focused on cost analysis of technology infrastructure (Brent, 1999; Rumble, 1993, 1999; Whalen & Wright, 1999). Although those cost estimation studies do offer policymakers some insight into the types and range of costs associated with distance education program in general, we can only infer from this broader framework how much it will cost to provide certain support services.

One of the biggest challenges in approaching the cost-effectiveness of leaner support is that the relationship between the input and output is not straight-line equation, and as the level of support gets beyond a certain point, the curve of student success seems to be flatten out (Sewart, 1993). The fact that there are relatively few references to direct and indirect costs involved with various support services also make it even more difficult to measure the cost-effectiveness of certain support services (Tait, 1995; Wagner, 1999).

The issue of cost-effectiveness in providing learner support services is also related to the mission of institution. The range and standard of learner support service provided by an institution will be eventually determined by whether it is more concerned about services or making profits from offering distance education programs. The bottom line is, in any case, the basic services needs to be provided regardless of the costs to guarantee the quality of education, and for beyond that, it is totally up to each institution to decide whether or not to offer more services.

Cost-effectiveness of learner support is likely to be achieved when the support system is structured to do "more with less," and this requires some creativity for institutions. One such example of scaling student services is partnering with other organizations such as businesses and school districts (Hickman, 1999). This may be an appropriate method for providing quality services by providing broader access and cutting the expenses on support staff training and maintenance by delegating the services to the specialists.

Lack of Empirical Research and Difficulties in Generalizing the Findings

The second issue revolves around the dominance of pragmatism in research of learner support. There are almost infinite variations of learner support in distance education practice, and the choice and use of certain services among those numerous services is largely based on practicalities rather than research findings. This leads to a tendency that pragmatism outweighs empirical inquiry or research in the area of learner support, which is confirmed by Robinson (1995). Based on the review of previous research and practice in this area, he concludes that learner support is heavily contingent on local circumstances. There is nothing wrong with research informed by practice, and the contingent nature of learner support seems to prone to such 'how to do it' type of case studies. However, there are missed opportunities where we can further exploit this critical issue in distance education.

Christenson (1998) made an interesting argument on how empirical research in social sciences may be used to guide practice as a framework. In developing theory in the social science, researchers' desires to extend the application of the best observed practice often leads them to emphasis too much on observation with the expense of theoretical reasoning. I believe this may be one of the major problems associated with pragmatic research in distance education, since in a case study, the generalizability of findings and its predictive power is somewhat limited to the institutional boundary where the practice is emulated. Thus this type of research often advocates the status quo rather than advancing theories and seeking/predicting changes beyond what has been observed.

Each support system is unique in a sense that it is dealing with a different student population in a different context, of course, but even so, we can always use of a general framework or model for learner support that is grounded in learning theories and supported by empirical data. Without such a framework, every institution needs to learn what does and does not work for them at expensive cost – trials and errors. And it would not just the institution but also the distance students that have to pay the cost.

Need for Learner-Centered Approach

Last issue is related to the need for learner-centered or customer-focused approach in planning and implementing learner support. No one can understand the difficulties that distance learners encounter better than the learners themselves. Yet in many institutions offering distance education programs, learner support is based on top-down provision rather than analysis of learners' needs (Tait, 1995; Sache & Mark, 2000; Scalzo et al., 2000). It is not new to the field of learner support at all, and had already been clearly stated by D. Sewart (1987):

It does not seem unfair to suggest that there is an overwhelming tendency within the field to offer systems from the viewpoint of the institution teaching at a distance rather than from the viewpoint of the student learning at a distance (p.72).

Traditionally, education has represented a provider-led rather than a customer-led activity and the central question of identifying student needs were often neglected. In the past when distance education was viewed as a product, rather than a process, and the quality of learning was identified as the quality of learning material, institutions were able to operate successfully with the provider-led mindset.

However, things have been changed, and today's distance learners are much more sophisticated, diversified, and demanding than ever, and they expect a lot more than well-designed learning materials. Besides that, the competition among distance education providers is such that if an institution fails to satisfy the students, it will loose them to one of its competitors. Understanding learners are critical in providing appropriate support services for the survival of distance education institutions nowadays.

When incorporating a learner-centered approach in designing and implementing learner support, we have to understand that it is a continuous process, rather than one-shot activity. Different learners may have different needs, and those needs may be changed over time. Those differences or changes can only be traced by systematic and continuous efforts to identify, analyze, synthesize, and assess distance learners' needs.

Nunan (1993) suggests a user-pay system as a ways to meet diverse user needs and expectation. He believes that by generating choices and options that can be purchased according to the individual needs and interprets, an institution can achieve customization in a more cost-effective way. This can be an insightful resolution approaching learner-centered support services, but if it is not followed by accurate descriptions of each option and counseling services, the learner may not be able to make informed decisions to select what is best for themselves. Also, the institution should provide some of the most basic

services such as library support or technical support as default. Otherwise, it may sacrifice the quality of education at the expense of convenience or cost-effectiveness.

Suggestions for Future Research

Learner support in distance education needs to be justified not only pedagogically but also financially, and to be able to do so, research on learner support should support the following areas: (1) developing/refining the methods of cost-benefit analysis, (2) developing a general model of learner support in web-based, dual-mode institutions, and (3) providing a ways to systematically incorporate the needs of distance learners in designing and implementing learner support services.

There have been a lot of claims that providing appropriate learner support services would increase the quality of learning and would positively influence student retention and satisfaction. However, these claims were rarely accompanied by supporting data, which leads to the tendency that learner support services become vulnerable to financial fluctuation. The only way to deal with this issue is to come up with sound methodologies to measure the cost-benefit of learner support.

The framework suggested by Cuckier (1997) is promising in that it includes a 'value-directed' benefit dimension and thus more suitable for measuring the values added by intangible services as most learner support services. He proposed three types of benefit measures - performance-oriented, value-oriented, and value-added benefits, and it is believed that future research on learner support can benefit from applying his multi-dimensional framework.

Secondly, the learner support models based on correspondence programs and their underlying assumptions need to be tested under new web-based distance education programs in the future research. Large-scale, text-based distance education institutions such as Open University in the UK have well-grounded learner support systems such as tutoring, counseling, and advising, and have served as a model for learner support system in previous research (Tait, 1995; Singh, 1988; Sewart, 1993). However, dual mode institutions that are now developing web-based distance education programs are facing different challenges in establishing and standardizing administrative procedures and support systems to accommodate new technologies and diversified learner population.

Thirdly, future research needs to adopt learner-centered approach in designing and implementing learner support services and develop ways to identify, analyze, synthesize, and assess student needs and systematically adapt the support system to those needs. Thus future research should be able to utilize various methods to efficiently communicate with distance learners. Research on student attrition is believed to provide valuable insights to understand what are some of underlying hindrances or barriers in distance learning and thus help future research on learner support to better meet the learners' needs.

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